

"Christophe: King of Haiti"

by
Hubert Cole

Reviewed by Robert Moore for
Caribbean Magazine

19.9.67.

Negritude, it is now well-known, was born, not in Africa but in Martinique; and by the same token, the first black nation to shuffle off imperialism was not Ghana but Haiti. This first biography of Henri-Christophe in English is therefore long overdue. Hubert Cole attempts here to do two things; to catch the ferment of the first successful black revolution in history; and to restore Henri-Christophe to a position of respect.

For far too long Christophe has existed in a literary limbo, seen either as a black romantic whose suicide was his first genuine recognition of reality or as a symbol of the fatuity of having black men exercise the power that white men claim as their due. What Mr. Cole does - quite rightly - is to set Christophe in the context of his gigantic difficulties - and the wonder that emerges is that he kept his humanity for so long. For his enemies were many, virulent and treacherous. Those who could have helped him were either non-committal in their policies or lacking in decisive influence. For instance he had to fight mulattoes like Pétion - men contemptuous of black leadership, but eager for black followers - men, also who more than once toyed with the idea of restoring Haiti to either French or British imperialism, even though they knew that this might mean the restoration of slavery. He failed to achieve American or English recognition of his regime. Both countries coveted the lucrative trade of Haiti; neither would countenance a regime of revolutionary blacks, since slavery still existed in their own dominions. Finally he had to restore to prosperity a country where cinders were more evident than crops - the revolutionary war against the French had left most of Haiti a smoking ruin. Small wonder then that in the face of all this pressure he crowned himself King of Haiti - an act intended more to boost his people's morale than to emphasise his own importance. He was not just a warrior or a picturesque monarch - he had, like our modern Nyerere, a shrewd sense of what makes a backward people go. He wanted his people to remain agriculturalists - for that he saw as the basis of a viable economy - but he wanted intelligent agriculturalists. He therefore sought help from Wilberforce and Clarkson, the English anti-slavery leaders, who sent him teachers and instructors to bring the latent talents of his people to the fore. Like Nyerere, and Kaunda he was neither a racialist nor a sycophant. White men with skills he would use but he was quick to point out to them that they were in Haiti as helpers and not as saviours. It is this surprising modernity in his attitudes that Mr. Cole is best at demonstrating.

And yet the book fails to bring Christophe fully alive. He remains a distant figure, his personality hidden behind his policies. It will take a West Indian novelist with a fine historical sense - someone who has himself felt the crisis in the coloured mind to portray with sensitivity the depths of Christophe's character.

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BBC

"Christophe: King of Haiti" Hubert Cole Caribbean Service

Reviewed by Robert Meere for
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BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION, BUSH HOUSE, LONDON, W.C.2

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REVIEW OF "Christophe: King
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